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VARIABLE GAIN AMPLIFIER WITH IMPROVED
CONTROL CHARACTERISTICS LINEARITY

This invention relates to the field of electronics, and in particular to a variable gain
5 amplifier that has consistent control characteristics linearity across a wide range of gain.

Variable gain amplifiers are commonly used, particularly in cellular telephone
handset transmitters. Common emitter gain stages are typically used to minimize power
consumption, wherein the gain is adjusted by adjusting the bias current. Unfortunately, the
input impedance of a common emitter amplifier varies with the bias current, leading to a
10 loss of gain and/or efficiency when the variable gain amplifier is driven by a constant-
impedance source. At high levels of bias current, the loading on the constant-impedance
source is substantial, and predictable/reliable performance is difficult to achieve.

Common solutions to this variable-input-impedance problem include the use of a
low-impedance device in parallel with the input to the variable-gain amplifier. This
15 solution substantially reduces the range of variation of the effective input impedance seen
by the constant-impedance source, but also results in an even greater loading of the source
at high levels of bias current, and hence a loss of available gain in the system. A stepped
gain control amplifier may also be used, but such an approach requires the added
complexity of a control loop to control the gain.

20 It is an object of this invention to provide a variable gain amplifier having
consistent and predictable performance across a wide range of gain. It is a further object of
this invention to provide a variable gain amplifier having substantially constant input
impedance across a wide range of gain.

These objects and others are achieved by providing a variable-impedance device in
25 parallel with the input to a variable-gain amplifier, and controlling the variable-impedance
device so as to provide a substantially constant load impedance to a source. Preferably, the
variable-impedance device includes a diode with a variable bias current. This diode bias
current is adjusted inversely with the amplifier bias current, such that the parallel sum of
the two input path impedances remains approximately constant across a wide range of gain.

30 This variable gain amplifier system is particularly well suited for use in a wireless
transmitter, or cellular telephone.

FIG. 1 illustrates an example block diagram of a variable gain amplifier system in accordance with this invention.

FIG. 2 illustrates an example circuit diagram of a variable gain amplifier system in accordance with this invention.

5 FIG. 3 illustrates an example plot of the relationship between the diode bias current and the amplifier bias current across a wide range of gain in accordance with this invention.

FIG. 4 illustrates an example plot of the resultant diode input impedance, amplifier input impedance, and overall input impedance across a wide range of gain in accordance with this invention.

10 FIG. 5 illustrates an example transmitter with variable gain amplifiers in accordance with this invention.

Throughout the drawings, the same reference numeral refers to the same element, or an element that performs substantially the same function.

FIG. 1 illustrates an example block diagram of a variable gain amplifier system 100 in accordance with this invention. The amplifier system 100 includes a conventional
15 variable gain amplifier 110 and a variable impedance device 120. In accordance with this invention, the variable impedance device 120 is configured to provide an impedance that varies inversely to the variation in the input impedance of the variable gain amplifier 110 as the gain is varied. In a preferred embodiment, the variable input impedance device 120
20 is controlled so that the effective input impedance at the input node V_{in} , being the parallel combination of the impedances of the variable gain amplifier 110 and the variable impedance device 120, remains substantially constant as the gain is varied.

FIG. 2 illustrates an example circuit diagram of a variable gain amplifier system in accordance with this invention, wherein the variable gain amplifier 110 and the variable
25 input device 120 are each capacitively coupled to the input V_{in} . The variable gain amplifier 110 is illustrated as a conventional common-emitter amplifier, wherein the transistors 215 and 216 are configured as a current mirror, and the collector bias current I_c determines where on the characteristics curve the transistor 216 operates. The current through the load 218 is determined by the bias current and the variation about this current
30 based on the gain of the amplifier 110 applied to the input V_{in} . At a low level of bias current I_c , the slope of the characteristics curve is slight, and thus the gain is low; at higher

levels of bias current, the slope is steeper, thereby providing greater gain. The variable current source 210 controls the bias current I_c , and thus serves as a gain control.

The variable impedance device 120 is illustrated in FIG. 2 as a diode-configured transistor 225 with a variable current source 220 that determines the diode bias current I_d .

5 In accordance with this invention, the diode bias current I_d is adjusted to provide an impedance of the device 120 that varies inversely with the input impedance of the variable amplifier 110 as the gain is changed. In the example of FIG. 2, the diode current I_d is decreased as the amplifier current I_c is increased, thereby providing increased impedance as the input impedance of the amplifier 110 decreases, and decreased impedance as the
10 input impedance of the amplifier 110 increases. Preferably, the device 120, being operated in parallel with the input of the amplifier 110, is configured to provide an impedance that varies with the gain of the amplifier 110 such that the parallel input impedance at the node V_{in} remains substantially constant.

In the example of FIG. 2, the desired diode bias current I_d is determined as follows.

15 As noted above, the highest input conductance (lowest input impedance) occurs at maximum gain, at a maximum amplifier bias current $I_{c_{max}}$. Using the conventional small signal model for a common emitter amplifier, the effective input conductance G_{amp} of the amplifier 110 is given as:

$$G_{amp} = \frac{q * I_{c_{max}}}{\beta k T} . \quad (1)$$

20 The effective input conductance G_{in} of the parallel combination of the amplifier 110 and device 120 is preferably just slightly larger than this highest input conductance of the amplifier 110. In this manner the overall loading of the prior stage is just slightly larger than the conventional amplifier 110 alone. Expressed algebraically:

$$G_{in} = M * \frac{q * I_{c_{max}}}{\beta k T} , \quad (2)$$

25 where M is nominally a factor of 1.1 or so.

Using the conventional small signal model for a diode-configured transistor, the overall input conductance can be expressed as:

$$G_{in} = M * \frac{q * I_{c_{max}}}{\beta k T} = \frac{q * I_c}{\beta k T} + \frac{q * I_d}{k T} . \quad (3)$$

and, solving for the diode bias current I_d directly:

$$I_d = \frac{M * I_{c_{\max}} - I_c}{\beta} \quad (4)$$

FIG. 3 illustrates an example plot of the relationship between the diode bias current I_d and the amplifier bias current I_c across a wide range of gain in accordance with this invention. The curve 310 illustrates the conventional relationship between the amplifier bias current I_c and the resultant gain of the amplifier 110 of FIG. 2. The curve 320 illustrates the desired diode bias current I_d as the amplifier bias current I_c is varied, corresponding to equation 4, above, wherein β accounts for the difference in scale of the vertical axes for I_d and I_c .

FIG. 4 illustrates an example plot of the resultant diode input impedance R_d , amplifier input impedance R_c , and overall input impedance R_{in} across a wide range of gain. As can be seen, in accordance with this invention, the overall input impedance R_{in} is substantially constant across the range of gain, compared to the input impedance R_c of a conventional variable gain amplifier alone.

With specific regard to the examples above, R_{in} corresponds to the inverse of the conductance G_{in} of equations 2 and 3, and is shown slightly curved for illustrative purposes. If the devices correspond exactly to the conventional small signal models given above, and the diode current I_d is controlled exactly as defined in equation 4, the resultant R_{in} will be flat across the entire range of gain for which the small signal models hold.

FIG. 5 illustrates an example transmitter 500 with variable gain amplifiers 540, 560 in accordance with this invention. The output of a baseband processing device 510 is coupled to a modulator 520 that provides a modulated signal at a desired radio-frequency (RF). This RF signal is filtered at 530, typically via an L-C tank circuit, and subsequently amplified by a variable gain amplifier 540. As is known in the art, the performance of a filter, and particularly an L-C tank circuit, is particularly sensitive to loading, and will exhibit varying performance when presented with a varying load. In accordance with this invention, the variable-gain amplifier 540 includes a variable impedance device at its input in parallel with an amplifier stage that is configured to provide a substantially constant impedance load to the filter 530 regardless of the desired gain.

The output of the variable-gain amplifier 540 is again filtered by a filter device 550, typically also an L-C tank circuit, and subsequently amplified by a variable gain amplifier

560. As discussed above, to avoid varying performance of the filter 550, the variable gain amplifier 560 includes a variable impedance device that is configured to provide a substantially constant impedance load to the filter 550 regardless of the desired gain.

A controller 590 controls the gain of the amplifier stage and the impedance of the variable impedance device of each of the amplifiers 540, 560, using, for example, the equations given above to adjust the amplifier and diode bias currents I_c and I_d to achieve the desired gain while maintaining a constant input impedance. In a cellular telephone embodiment, for example, the controller 590 adjusts the gain of the amplifiers 540, 560 in dependence upon the current cellular cell size and/or the current interference or other noise factors. The output of the second variable gain amplifier 560 is coupled to an RF power amplifier 570 for transmission as a radio frequency wave at the desired power level, determined by the gain of the variable gain amplifiers 540, 560.

As would be evident to one of ordinary skill in the art, the gain and impedance control functions may be distributed between the controller 590 and the amplifiers 540, 560. The controller 590 may be configured to merely provide a gain control signal to the amplifiers 540, 560, and the amplifiers 540, 560 would be configured to provide the appropriate bias currents to the amplifier and diode; at another extreme, the controller 590 may be configured to provide the amplifier and diode bias currents I_c and I_d directly to each of the amplifiers 540, 560.

The foregoing merely illustrates the principles of the invention. It will thus be appreciated that those skilled in the art will be able to devise various arrangements which, although not explicitly described or shown herein, embody the principles of the invention and are thus within its spirit and scope. For example, other techniques and configurations are commonly available for providing a variable gain amplifier 110, which may exhibit different variances in input impedance with gain. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that other techniques and configurations for providing a variable impedance device 120 may be used to provide the inverse impedance characteristics of these other amplifiers 110 to effect a relatively constant parallel input impedance with varying gains. These and other system configuration and optimization features will be evident to one of ordinary skill in the art in view of this disclosure, and are included within the scope of the following claims.